

Welch amendment preserves critical outreach role for VSAC

Rep. Peter Welch supported and the House passed Thursday the single largest investment in college financial aid in history – paid for entirely with the savings realized by making federal loans directly to students and families.

The vote was 253-171.

The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (H.R. 3221) will expand access to an affordable college education, transform early education opportunities and build a world-class community college system. The legislation increases Pell Grants to \$6,900 by 2019 from \$5,350 today, expands the Perkins low-cost loan program to every U.S. college and simplifies the process of applying for student financial aid.

Vermont students will receive \$60 million more in Pell Grants , and an additional 2,985 students will be eligible over the next 10 years.

Welch successfully amended the bill Thursday morning to ensure that non-profit lenders like the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation can continue providing valuable services like college counseling, career placement, financial aid and financial literacy. It also ensures that borrower services – like delinquency prevention and default aversion – are allowed uses of the new State Innovation Completion Grants.

“This bill takes important strides toward ensuring that every student and every family can afford a college education. By investing in students and providing them the tools they need to succeed, this legislation will help make college more affordable for middle class families,” Welch said. “I am pleased that my amendment will help VSAC continue its critical outreach services, which have helped so many Vermonters take advantage of higher education and the opportunities that come with it.”

Don Vickers, president and CEO of VSAC, said, “Rep. Welch has been a true champion for increasing educational opportunities for Vermonters, as shown by his leadership and strong support for the programs and services provided by VSAC. This amendment is a critical first step.”

In addition to a \$40 billion increase in Pell Grants and \$3 billion for innovative college access and completion programs, the legislation also enhances early childhood education efforts by creating a new Early Learning Challenge Fund to encourage innovative, high quality instruction. Vermont will receive \$750,000 a year for the next five years in college access grants and \$9 million in early education facility improvements.

The bill creates a new competitive grant program for community colleges to improve instruction, work with local employers and improve student support services – and will provide \$3 million to Vermont’s community colleges to renovate and repair their campuses.

“The focus and support for community colleges in this bill is tremendous and is going to help us fulfill our mission of helping people access college and accomplish their goals – whether it’s to start their college education, earn a college degree, come back for retraining, or earn credits to transfer to a four-year program,” said Joyce Judy, interim president of the Community College of Vermont. “People come to community colleges for a wide variety of reasons, and I believe this bill will strengthen us and help us succeed at this broad mission.”

Welch held a roundtable in September at Vermont Technical College in Randolph to meet with students and educators who would be most affected by the legislation. Jessica Grout, a Waterbury resident and senior at VTC, took part in the roundtable and spoke about the importance of retaining VSAC’s outreach programs.

“VSAC’s outreach programs are pretty much what made college possible for me. Not only did they work with me to explore my college options, they also worked with my parents to help find financing options to afford college,” said Grout, one of three siblings pursuing a college degree. “By preserving VSAC’s role in helping students like me, many other Vermont students will have the support I’ve relied on.”